

The Impact of Terrorism on Social Stability in Northern Nigeria and the Way Forward

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Abstract

Northern Nigeria has been a focal point of terrorist activities, particularly by groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). These activities have profoundly affected the region's social fabric, leading to mass displacement, economic disruption, intercommunal tensions, and a decline in educational opportunities. The humanitarian crisis, coupled with growing insecurity, has weakened governance structures and undermined social cohesion. Economic activities, particularly agriculture, have been significantly affected, exacerbating poverty and food insecurity. The disruption of education due to targeted attacks on schools has further deepened socio-economic disparities. While the Nigerian government has increased security spending, challenges such as corruption, inadequate training, and insufficient resources persist. This article examines the multifaceted impact of terrorism on social stability in Northern Nigeria and discusses potential strategies for fostering resilience, improving governance, and ensuring sustainable peace in the region.

Keywords: *Terrorism, social stability, Boko Haram, displacement, economic disruption, education, Nigeria.*

Introduction

Northern Nigeria has been a focal point of terrorist activities, particularly by groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). These activities have profoundly affected the region's social fabric, leading to displacement, economic disruption, and heightened intercommunal tensions. Understanding the impact of these terrorist activities is crucial for developing effective countermeasures and fostering resilience within affected communities.

The emergence of Boko Haram in 2009 marked a significant turning point in Nigeria's security landscape. Initially, the group focused on opposing Western education and values, encapsulated in its name, which translates to "Western education is forbidden" in Hausa. Over time, Boko Haram's tactics evolved into a violent insurgency aimed at establishing an Islamic state in the region. The group's activities have resulted in widespread violence, including mass killings, abductions, and destruction of property. The insurgency has not only led to significant loss of life but has also disrupted the socio-economic structures of Northern Nigeria.

The impact of terrorism on social stability in Northern Nigeria is multifaceted. One of the most immediate consequences is the mass displacement of populations. According to the United Nations, the conflict has resulted in the displacement of over 2 million people within the region. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) often reside in overcrowded camps with limited access

to basic amenities, exacerbating humanitarian challenges. The displacement disrupts community cohesion and places additional strain on already limited resources.

Economically, terrorism has severely disrupted activities in Northern Nigeria. Agriculture, a primary livelihood for many in the region, has been particularly affected. A report by the African Development Bank indicates that terrorism leads to a reallocation of economic activity away from private investment to government spending, particularly in defense, thereby crowding out investment and hindering economic growth. The destruction of infrastructure and the decline in agricultural productivity have led to increased poverty and food insecurity.

The pervasive insecurity has heightened intercommunal tensions, particularly between different ethnic and religious groups. The competition for scarce resources, coupled with mutual distrust, has led to a cycle of violence and reprisals. The International Crisis Group notes that the persistent and growing strength of violent extremist organizations in the Sahel threatens to exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and spread instability across Africa, posing significant security and financial risks. This observation underscores the broader regional implications of the conflict in Northern Nigeria.

The insurgency has also had a detrimental effect on education in the region. Schools have been targeted, leading to closures and a decline in enrollment. The abduction of schoolchildren, most notably the Chibok girls in 2014, has instilled fear among parents and students, further discouraging educational pursuits. This disruption in education hampers human capital development and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and instability.

In response to the escalating violence, the Nigerian government has increased security spending. Between 2007 and 2016, Nigeria spent approximately \$78.4 billion on security, reflecting the severity of the threat posed by terrorist activities. Despite these efforts, challenges persist due to factors such as corruption, inadequate training, and insufficient resources within the security apparatus.

Addressing the challenges posed by terrorism in Northern Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach that includes not only military interventions but also socio-economic development, community engagement, and efforts to foster intercommunal harmony. Building resilience within affected communities is essential for restoring and maintaining social stability in the region.

In a nutshell, the impact of terrorism on social stability in Northern Nigeria is profound and multifaceted, affecting displacement, economic activities, social cohesion, and education. A holistic approach that addresses both the immediate security concerns and the underlying socio-economic issues is crucial for achieving sustainable peace and development in the region.

Displacement and Humanitarian Crisis in Northern Nigeria

The protracted conflict in Northern Nigeria, primarily driven by insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has precipitated a severe humanitarian crisis characterized by widespread displacement and acute human suffering. As of December 2023, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported approximately 3.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) across Nigeria, with a significant concentration in the northern regions.

Magnitude of Displacement

The northeastern states, notably Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, have borne the brunt of the insurgency. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of December 2021, there were about 2.2 million IDPs in the North East, with Borno State alone

accounting for over 74% of this population. The situation has further deteriorated, with the UN seeking \$910 million in early 2025 to address the escalating humanitarian needs in the region.

Humanitarian Challenges

The mass displacement has led to overcrowded IDP camps, where access to essential services such as clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and education is severely limited. Protection concerns are paramount, especially for vulnerable groups. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) highlights that more than 2 million IDPs are unable to return to their homes, with women and girls facing heightened risks of violence, abduction, and gender-based violence.

Food insecurity is another critical issue. The displacement has disrupted agricultural activities, leading to a decline in food production and availability. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) reports that in the northeast, where over 2 million people are displaced, the hunger crisis has reached emergency levels, with uprooted families in acute need of food, clean water, shelter, education, and healthcare.

Compounding Factors

Environmental factors have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. In 2024, Borno State experienced catastrophic flooding following the collapse of the Alau Dam, resulting in at least 150 deaths and displacing over 419,000 individuals. The United Nations described it as the worst flood to hit the city in thirty years, affecting over one million people. Such events compound the challenges faced by displaced populations and strain the already limited resources of humanitarian agencies.

Government and International Response

The Nigerian government, in collaboration with international partners, has initiated efforts to address the displacement crisis. However, challenges persist. The government's resettlement programs have faced criticism, with reports indicating that many IDPs are being returned to their hometowns despite ongoing security concerns. Analysts warn that such actions may endanger civilians, as the threat from insurgent groups remains pervasive.

International organizations continue to provide critical support. The UN's appeal for \$910 million underscores the scale of the crisis and the need for sustained humanitarian assistance. Despite these efforts, the situation remains dire, with millions of Nigerians in the northern regions requiring urgent aid to meet their basic needs and rebuild their lives.

The displacement and humanitarian crisis in Northern Nigeria are both complex and multifaceted, thus, demand a coordinated and sustained response. Addressing the immediate needs of IDPs, ensuring their protection, and creating conditions for safe and voluntary return are essential steps toward mitigating the crisis and restoring stability in the region.

Economic Disruption in Northern Nigeria Due to Terrorism

The emergence of terrorist groups, notably Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has significantly disrupted the economic landscape of Northern Nigeria. The repercussions of their activities are multifaceted, affecting various sectors and impeding the region's overall economic development.

Agricultural Decline

Agriculture, the backbone of Northern Nigeria's economy, has been severely impacted by terrorist activities. The persistent insecurity has forced many farmers to abandon their lands, leading to reduced agricultural output and heightened food insecurity. A study by Adelaja and George (2019) found that the Boko Haram insurgency led to a significant decline in agricultural production in affected areas, exacerbating poverty and hunger. The displacement of farming communities and the destruction of farmlands have disrupted the agricultural value chain, affecting food supply and prices across the region.

Industrial and Commercial Setbacks

The industrial and commercial sectors have not been spared. Frequent attacks on businesses, markets, and infrastructure have led to the closure of numerous enterprises. For instance, in Kano, a major commercial hub in Northern Nigeria, approximately 80% of businesses were reported to have shut down due to security challenges and power failures resulting from terrorist attacks (Awojobi, 2014). This downturn has led to significant job losses and a decline in economic activities, further impoverishing the populace.

Foreign Investment Withdrawal

The unstable security situation has deterred foreign investors, leading to a withdrawal of investments from the region. Between 2011 and 2020, Nigerians paid at least 18 billion naira to free family members and friends kidnapped by bandits, highlighting the pervasive insecurity (BBC News, 2020). The pervasive insecurity and the threat of attacks have made Northern Nigeria an unattractive destination for foreign capital, depriving the region of essential investments needed for economic growth and development.

Infrastructure Destruction

Terrorist activities have led to the destruction of critical infrastructure, including roads, bridges, schools, and healthcare facilities. This destruction hampers economic activities by isolating communities, disrupting trade routes, and limiting access to markets and services. The cost of rebuilding this infrastructure places an additional financial burden on the government and diverts resources from other developmental projects.

Fiscal Strain on Government Resources

The Nigerian government has been compelled to allocate substantial resources to counter-terrorism efforts, thereby straining public finances. A report by the African Development Bank (2017) indicates that terrorism leads to a reallocation of economic activity away from private investment to government spending, particularly in defense, thereby crowding out investment and hindering economic growth. This shift in fiscal priorities often comes at the expense of essential public services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure development, further impeding the region's socio-economic progress.

Disruption of Education and Human Capital Development

The insurgency has also disrupted education in Northern Nigeria, with numerous schools destroyed or closed due to attacks and insecurity. This disruption hampers human capital development, as children are deprived of education, leading to a less skilled workforce in the future. The long-term economic implications include reduced productivity and limited economic

opportunities for the affected population.

Consequently, it is note-worthy that the economic disruption caused by terrorism in Northern Nigeria is profound and multifaceted, affecting agriculture, commerce, investment, infrastructure, and human capital development. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that combines enhanced security measures with targeted economic interventions aimed at revitalizing affected sectors and rebuilding the region's economic resilience.

Social Fragmentation and Intercommunal Tensions Due to Terrorism in Northern Nigeria

The protracted insurgency in Northern Nigeria, primarily driven by groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has significantly exacerbated social fragmentation and heightened intercommunal tensions in the region. The pervasive violence has disrupted traditional social structures, eroded trust among communities, and intensified existing ethnic and religious divides.

The pervasive insecurity has heightened intercommunal tensions, particularly between different ethnic and religious groups. The competition for scarce resources, coupled with mutual distrust, has led to a cycle of violence and reprisals. The International Crisis Group (2024) notes that the persistent and growing strength of violent extremist organizations in the Sahel threatens to exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and spread instability across Africa, posing significant security and financial risks. This observation underscores the broader regional implications of the conflict in Northern Nigeria.

Erosion of Social Cohesion

The relentless attacks by terrorist groups have led to widespread displacement, with millions forced to flee their homes. This mass movement has disrupted established community networks and support systems, leading to a breakdown in social cohesion. The displacement often results in the mixing of diverse ethnic and religious groups in unfamiliar settings, sometimes leading to misunderstandings and conflicts over resources. The United Nations reports that conflict remains the primary driver of terrorism, with more than 99% of all terrorist-related deaths occurring in countries involved in violent conflict or with high levels of political terror, including Nigeria.

Intensification of Ethnic and Religious Divides

Northern Nigeria is characterized by a complex tapestry of ethnic and religious identities. The insurgency has exploited and deepened these divisions. For instance, Boko Haram's ideology, which vehemently opposes Western education and seeks to establish an Islamic state, has alienated non-Muslim communities and moderate Muslims alike. This has led to mutual suspicion and hostility among different groups. The violence perpetrated by these groups has not only targeted security forces but also civilians, further exacerbating intercommunal tensions.

Resource-Based Conflicts

The insurgency has also intensified competition over scarce resources. Displaced populations often move into areas already struggling with limited resources, leading to conflicts with host communities. The influx of IDPs can strain local economies, healthcare, and educational facilities, leading to resentment and tension between groups. Additionally, the destruction of farmlands and the disruption of agricultural activities by terrorist groups have led to food shortages, further fueling competition and conflict over arable land and resources.

Manipulation by Political Actors

Political actors have sometimes exploited the prevailing insecurity to advance their agendas, further deepening social fragmentation. In certain instances, politicians have been accused of exacerbating tensions by aligning with or supporting particular groups to gain political leverage. This complicity not only undermines efforts to foster unity but also perpetuates a cycle of violence and mistrust among communities. The type of violence, conflict, and terrorism in Northern Nigeria does not discriminate in its choice of target, affecting various communities and exacerbating existing tensions.

Emergence of Self-Defense Groups

In response to the inadequacies of state security apparatus in providing protection, some communities have formed self-defense militias. While these groups aim to defend their communities, they often operate outside the law and have been implicated in human rights abuses. Their existence further fragments the social fabric, as they may target members of other communities perceived as threats, thereby escalating intercommunal tensions.

The insurgency in Northern Nigeria has profoundly disrupted the social fabric of the region. The resulting social fragmentation and heightened intercommunal tensions pose significant challenges to peacebuilding and development efforts. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies that not only focus on military solutions but also prioritize social reconciliation, economic development, and the restoration of trust among diverse communities.

Educational Impact of Terrorism in Northern Nigeria

The protracted insurgency in Northern Nigeria, primarily driven by groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has had a profound and deleterious effect on the region's educational sector. The deliberate targeting of educational institutions, abduction of students, and pervasive insecurity have disrupted learning, leading to significant declines in enrollment, closure of schools, and a generation of children deprived of education.

Attacks on Educational Institutions

Boko Haram, whose name translates to "Western education is forbidden," has explicitly targeted schools to further its anti-Western ideology. Notable incidents include the 2013 attack on the Government Secondary School in Mamudo, Yobe State, where at least 42 individuals, predominantly students, were killed. Similarly, in September 2013, gunmen attacked the College of Agriculture in Gujba, Yobe State, resulting in the deaths of 44 students and teachers.

The most internationally recognized incident is the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014, which drew global condemnation and highlighted the vulnerability of students in the region. These attacks have instilled fear among students and parents, leading to decreased school attendance and closures.

Decline in Enrollment and School Closures

The persistent threat of violence has led to a significant decline in school enrollment. Many parents, fearing for their children's safety, opt to keep them at home. A report by the Brookings Institution noted that between 2009 and 2015, over 910 schools were destroyed, and at least 1,500 were forced to close due to the insurgency. This has resulted in more than 600,000 children losing access to education during that period.

Abduction and Recruitment of Students

Beyond attacks on infrastructure, terrorist groups have abducted students, using them as leverage for ransom or indoctrinating them into their ranks. The abduction of schoolgirls, as seen in the Chibok incident, is part of a broader strategy to discourage female education and propagate their ideology. According to a report by the National Human Rights Commission of Nigeria, such abductions have led to temporary closure of schools and displacement of children and adults in the affected areas.

Long-Term Implications

The disruption of education has long-term socio-economic implications. A generation deprived of education faces limited economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and increasing susceptibility to radicalization. The World Bank has recognized the critical need to address these challenges, approving a \$1.57 billion financing package in 2024 to support Nigeria's health and education sectors, aiming to increase the availability and effectiveness of financing for basic education and primary healthcare services.

The insurgency in Northern Nigeria has severely compromised the educational sector, with attacks on schools, abductions, and pervasive insecurity leading to decreased enrollment, school closures, and a generation of children deprived of learning opportunities. Addressing this crisis requires comprehensive strategies that encompass security measures, infrastructure rehabilitation, psychological support for affected students, and community engagement to restore confidence in the education system.

Government Response and Security Measures in Northern Nigeria

In response to the escalating violence, the Nigerian government has increased security spending. Between 2007 and 2016, Nigeria spent approximately \$78.4 billion on security, reflecting the severity of the threat posed by terrorist activities (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Despite these efforts, challenges persist due to factors such as corruption, inadequate training, and insufficient resources within the security apparatus.

The Nigerian government has implemented a multifaceted approach to counter the persistent threat of terrorism in Northern Nigeria, primarily posed by groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This strategy encompasses military operations, legal frameworks, regional collaborations, and community-based initiatives.

Military Operations

The Nigerian military has intensified its counterinsurgency efforts through various operations aimed at dismantling terrorist networks and securing affected regions. In a recent offensive spanning three months, the military reported neutralizing 1,937 terrorists, arresting 2,782 suspects, and rescuing 1,854 hostages. Notably, high-profile terrorist leaders, including Halilu Sububu, were eliminated during these operations.

Furthermore, the military has conducted targeted operations in the northeast, a region heavily impacted by insurgent activities. For instance, a weeklong operation in Borno State resulted in the elimination of 76 militants, the arrest of 72 suspects, and the rescue of eight hostages.

Legal Frameworks and Prosecutions

To strengthen its counterterrorism legal framework, Nigeria enacted the Terrorism (Prevention) Act in 2011, with amendments in 2013, criminalizing various terrorism-related activities. In a

significant move to hold perpetrators accountable, Nigerian courts recently convicted 125 individuals on charges including terrorism, financing terrorism, and related crimes. This follows earlier mass trials that resulted in numerous convictions and acquittals.

Regional Collaboration

Recognizing the transnational nature of the terrorist threat, Nigeria has engaged in regional cooperation to enhance security. Despite political tensions following Niger's 2023 coup, Nigeria and Niger signed a security cooperation agreement in August 2024, reaffirming their commitment to combating insurgency in the Lake Chad region. This agreement underscores the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing shared security challenges.

Community-Based Initiatives

The Nigerian government has also supported community-based security initiatives to complement formal military efforts. The Nigerian Hunter & Forest Security Service (NHFSS), established to protect forests and wildlife, has evolved to play a crucial role in counterinsurgency operations. NHFSS collaborates with the military and other security agencies to combat insurgents, particularly in forested regions that serve as terrorist hideouts.

Challenges and Ongoing Efforts

Despite these measures, challenges persist. Terrorist groups continue to carry out attacks, as evidenced by the recent killing of at least 40 farmers in Borno State. The Nigerian government remains committed to enhancing its strategies, focusing on improving military capabilities, strengthening legal frameworks, fostering regional cooperation, and engaging local communities to restore peace and security in Northern Nigeria.

Conclusion

Terrorism in Northern Nigeria has severely impacted social stability, leading to displacement, economic disruption, educational setbacks, and deepening intercommunal tensions. Despite government efforts through military operations, legal frameworks, and regional collaborations, the persistence of terrorist activities highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach. Strengthening counterterrorism strategies, improving economic opportunities, and fostering intercommunal dialogue are essential to restoring stability. Addressing the root causes of terrorism, such as poverty and political marginalization, is crucial for sustainable peace. With coordinated efforts from the government, communities, and international partners, Northern Nigeria can overcome the challenges posed by terrorism and rebuild a more secure and prosperous society.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian government should enhance its counterterrorism strategies by integrating intelligence-based operations, improving military coordination, and deploying advanced surveillance technology to track and dismantle terrorist networks.
2. Regional governments should collaborate to strengthen border security and prevent the influx of foreign fighters, weapons, and funding sources that fuel terrorism in Northern Nigeria.
3. Community-based security initiatives, such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), should be expanded and adequately funded to improve local intelligence gathering and

grassroots security efforts.

4. The government should rebuild and fortify schools affected by terrorism, provide psychological support for students, and implement alternative education programs to mitigate the disruption of learning.
5. Job creation programs, vocational training, and financial incentives should be provided to vulnerable communities to reduce youth unemployment and discourage recruitment into terrorist groups.
6. Initiatives that foster interethnic and interreligious dialogue should be encouraged to bridge divisions and reduce tensions among communities affected by terrorism.
7. The Nigerian government should ensure that counterterrorism laws are enforced effectively, with fair trials for suspected terrorists, while also upholding human rights and avoiding extrajudicial measures.
8. Nigeria should work closely with neighboring countries, the African Union, and international bodies to improve intelligence-sharing, counter-financing efforts, and military cooperation in combating terrorism.
9. Government and international agencies should expand humanitarian aid programs, including food security, healthcare, and shelter, for displaced persons and victims of terrorist attacks.
10. A comprehensive approach that tackles underlying issues such as poverty, corruption, political marginalization, and ideological extremism should be adopted to create long-term stability and peace in Northern Nigeria.

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